



Voice for the Oppressed: A Comparative Study of the Poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam and Faiz Ahmed Faiz

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Abstract— *Subalterns, the palpable fuel of society's power structure, are always marginalized by the tormentors from the corridors of power. The oppressors use their life force to make them oppressed. One of the main tasks of literature is to reveal the truth of society. Kazi Nazrul Islam and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, two prominent revolutionary poets in the Indian subcontinent, spoke on behalf of the masses but in two different languages (Bengali and Urdu). Their poems still carry considerable importance in the context of contemporaneity. The exploitation of the power-centric society and resistance of the subaltern have come alive through their poetry. The poets undertaken for the present research consistently speak out against ethnic violence and political exploitation in their verses. The words for the wretched are always uttered in their voice. They have portrayed the misery of the marginalized people and suggested the way of achieving true freedom. Their poems transcend their time because of the universality of their contents and themes. Their poems intrinsically support subaltern studies worldwide. This study aims to compare Kazi Nazrul Islam and Faiz Ahmed Faiz on the grounds of their concerns for the subaltern and their resistance infusing with three theoretical concepts, subaltern, power, theory of resistance. The study will further focus on how the two poets with their similarities have depicted the marginalized voice of the subalterns.*

Keywords— *Kazi Nazrul Islam, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, subaltern, power concept, theory of resistance, oppression.*

INTRODUCTION

Poets have always been proponents of historical and current events in their unique style. They can study the political and social issues of their time in depth. Instead of focusing solely on aesthetics, the most famous poets throughout history have used their poetry to further a social cause. It has to be understood that society is not just made up of those who rule society from the center of power. The poets must bring out the voice of the ordinary people who give life force for the survival of the society from behind the political structure. But marginal can never be enlightened in the light of history just as there is

darkness under the lamp. They are the power source for the powerful in this society, but they are outside the power structure. Kazi Nazrul Islam and Faiz Ahmed Faiz are the most prominent poets from the Indian subcontinent who wrote poetry for oppressed people outrageously without any fear. Their poems speak of ethnic violence and political exploitation, which have been used to subdue the masses for years. Their poems are not only about the rights of the unfortunate but also encourage them to be optimistic and to fight for freedom. Their poems used different types of symbols like; prison, flower, natural elements, etc., which added poetic beauty and used them as a weapon to raise voice against the exploiters. Their poetry never

bowed to power. They have spoken the truth against political atrocities in their poems proudly. In their time, both of them were destined to become a symbol of rebellion and dissent. As much as their existence, their poems came to reflect the longings of the people who had come into their lives so briefly and then cynically vanished. Surprisingly, both of them grew to be influential ideological figures. Their voice always rang high and clear, and their words remained a beacon of light that could not be extinguished even amid the grave-like silence of martial law control. The purpose of this study aims to compare the political strain in the poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam and Faiz Ahmed Faiz for the tussle for the subaltern. It focuses on both of these poets' political themes in their poetry so deftly and without losing sight of the inherent element of poetic aesthetics. They used symbolic and figurative language to depict the invaders' oppression and horrors against the subalterns. The purpose of this study is to compare Kazi Nazrul Islam and Faiz Ahmed Faiz in terms of their concerns for the oppressed and their resistance based on three theoretical frameworks, subaltern, power, theory of resistance. The research will also look at how the two poets, with their similarities, depicted the marginalized voice of subalterns.

APPROACHES OF KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM AND FAIZ AHMED FAIZ

Kazi Nazrul Islam and Faiz Ahmed Faiz were nationalistic because of their anti-colonial attitude and resistance to imperialism through writing during the colonial period. They spoke up against the misery of the exploited masses who were victims of British colonialism on a local level. For Nazrul and Faiz, nationalism was a lifelong love and preoccupation, and they were active in cultural and political nationalism, eventually emerging as decolonization prophets. They achieved this by their non-communal voice for equality and brotherhood, which propelled them to international prominence even in the postcolonial age. In the field of international literature, they share remarkable parallels not only in their universal thinking about freedom and nationalism but also in their anti-colonial mentality, which may be summarized simply as a "miracle." From the beginning to the end, they struggled against the 'grain' and brutal reality in this mortal world. Readers can see their places in anti-colonial conflicts and resistance to colonial control, and this defiance to colonialism is regarded as a nationalist discourse. As a result, they would be a part of the postcolonial circle. Leela Gandhi stresses the point that even the "most cosmopolitan" postcolonial scholars

recognize that nationalism has been a significant aspect in third-world decolonization campaigns.

They were enormously struggling people who fought alone against everything unjust, everything working against humanity. Their central concept was secularism, which allowed them to objectively honor every religion, caste, gender, and race in the world. As a result, they provided spiritual freedom to individuals who were bound by their beliefs and actions.

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM AND FAIZ AHMED FAIZ

Despite his terrible poverty and wandering life, Kazi Nazrul Islam never became self-centered like many of his contemporaries; instead, he possessed a keen insight into the heart of mankind's suffering. He discovered that the root of the problem is a nation's reliance on another country, and he screamed at the British Raj. According to Mohammad Nurul Huda, he was sentenced to one year in prison on January 16, 1923 for delivering his *Deposition of a Political Prisoner* in the court of the chief judicial magistrate in Calcutta (7). The entire nation was outraged by the decision, and Rabindranath Tagore himself sent a telegraph from Shilong to the effect that "give up your hunger strike, our literature claims you" (qtd. in Huda, 7). Tagore also dedicated his drama *Basanta* (Spring) to Nazrul, who had gone on a forty-day hunger strike inside the jail. At the insistence of the main literary and political figures of his period, he finally ended his protest. Professor Winston E. Langley of the University of Massachusetts, author of the book *Kazi Nazrul Islam: The Voice of Poetry and the Struggle for Human Wholeness* describes Nazrul as,

"A moral giant, Indeed, Nazru was a moral giant and wrote boldly on human rights and dignity and against religious fanaticism." (*Two Genius from the East and West*, 2014, p.23)

About Faiz Ahmed Faiz, a professor from University of Kashmir, Ahsan UL Haq, sates in one of his articles,

"There are no qualms, in stating that Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911- 1984) is the voice of the revolution, one of the greatest and renowned Urdu poets of the subcontinent in the twentieth century. He is often credited as the poet of protest, resistance and the iconic voice."

Regarding Faiz's universality, Carlo Coppola, professor in Oakland University, remarks,

“ A spokesperson for the world’s voiceless and suffering people – whether Indians oppressed by British in the ’40s, freedom fighters in Africa, the Rosenbergs in cold-war America in the ’50s, Vietnamese peasants fleeing American napalm in the ’60s, or Palestinian children living in the refugee camps in the ’70s – Faiz wrote painfully, stunningly, and compassionately of the human aspirations for freedom: a hallmark of his verse. (qtd. in Ali xiii-xiv)”

Noami Lazard observed about Faiz that when he became the editor of *The Pakistan Times* he used that position to speak in prose as well as poetry for peace and social justice. He made himself known as opponent of oppression.

In 1943 Faiz was sent to the British Indian Army, Nazrul was in British Indian Army, and Faiz was awarded the British Empire Medal for the service he served in World War 2. After the partition of India in 1947, Faiz resigned from the army and became editor of *The Pakistan Times*, a socialist English-language newspaper. Nazrul also edited a newspaper named *Langol, Dhumketu*, after returning from the war. Faiz was arrested together with a group of army commanders on March 9, 1951, under the Safety Act, and charged with the failed coup attempt known as the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case. He was sentenced to death and was imprisoned for four years before being released. He wrote two books at the time of his imprisonment. One is *Dast-e Saba* and the other one is *Zindan Namah*. Both of them are focusing on the life of prison. But through his imprisonment, his way of thinking for the subaltern became more sharpened.

CONCEPT OF SUBALTERN IN NAZRUL AND FAIZ’S POEM

The subaltern, according to Gayatri Spivak, is unable to talk. She points out that in Gramsci’s original hidden meaning, the term meant “proletarian,” a group whose voices could not be heard because they were systematically excluded from the capitalist bourgeois discourse. Everything which limited or has no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern – a zone of difference in postcolonial terms. Same definition is also found in Nazrul’s and Faiz’s poem. In “Song Of the Workers” Nazrul Islam addresses the identity of the subaltern,

“We bring moonlight, light the oceans
Yet getting thirsty we keep thirsting
Not a drop of water we receive” (Nazrul, *Poet of Tolerance*, 2013, p. 78)

Faiz also reveals the identity like Nazrul in his poem “As We Are” where he sates,

“Like the fading image of beauty once loved
Clasping to us the cloak of our obscurity.” (Faiz, *100 Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz*, 2002, p. 37)

Both of these poets had spoken out for the commoner and had been imprisoned by the government. The similarity of their thoughts for the subaltern that is being sought in this article can be understood through their uncompromising attitude towards the exploiters.

RESISTANCE IN NAZRUL AND FAIZ’S POEMS

Their poems speak of the resistance of the subaltern. They speak against power dominance. Resistance against this power dominance can be seen inside Foucault’s Theory of Resistance. One of the most popular passages in Volume I of the *History of Sexuality* concerns the relation between power and resistance in the ‘Method’ section. There, Foucault says:

“Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”

The way Faiz speaks of resistance in his poem “Speak” underlines the same. In the poem, Faiz says,

“ Locks will soon open wide their jaws,
The loops of chains will be out-spread” (Faiz, *100 Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz*, 2002, p. 35)

In another poem “As We Are” Faiz states same flame of resistance,

“ And a vague, confused, search for remedy,
A desire of revolt, prison, a desert where to flee.” (Faiz, *100 Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz*, 2002, p. 37)

Kazi Nazrul Islam is also thinking of resistance in same way as Faiz. In his Poem, “The Song of Destruction”, Nazrul States,

“Let the flag of Nemesis fly over the walls
Who is master, who is king
Who dares punish the unshackled truth” (Nazrul, *Nazrul: An Evaluation*, 1997, p.15)

In the poem “Ovation to the prisoners” Nazrul expressed his ecstatic delight at the youth sharing their desire for liberation.

“Who is this I hear
At the red dawn of light?

I hear the roar of liberation” (Nazrul, *Nazrul: An Evaluation*, 1997, p.15)

CONCEPT OF POWER IN NAZUL AND FAIZ’S POEMS

Power, according to Foucault, can be found anywhere and comes from anywhere. According to J. Gaventa, Foucault is one of the few thinkers on power who recognizes that power may be a necessary, creative, and good force in society, rather than only a negative, coercive, or oppressive one that forces people to do things against our will. To inspire this positive force, Faiz and Nazrul have encouraged and inspired the exploited in their poems so that they can speak their minds.

In Nazrul's poems, the exploitation and deprivation of the commoner and encouragement for the rights of the exploited are expressed. One of Nazrul's inspirational poems is "The Rebel." In this poem, the poet urges the subaltern to raise their voice about their rights, their courage, about their strength. They should make the atrocities remind the real power on which this society is standing. They have to talk about their struggle against oppression. The poet wants to explain that the path of their liberation will be sharpened by raising their voices. In the poem,

“Proclaim the valiant one,
Proclaim that “my head is eternally held high”
Proclaim that
“My rebellious look and bravery
Makes the Himalayan peaks bow before me””

(Nazrul, *Poet of Tolerance*, 64)

A similar inspiration for the subaltern, which is found in Nazrul's poem, can be seen in Faiz's poem "Speak." In this poem, the poet has repeatedly said that now is the time to speak out against the exploiters. Exploiters must be informed of the exploited people's rights. It is also said that we have to speak for ourselves before the complete death of the soul. In this poem,

“Speak, for your lips are free
Speak, for your tongue is still yours
Your upright body belongs to you
Speak, for your soul still yours”(Faiz, *The Colors of My Heart*, 2017, p.13)

Another poem that can be said to be inspirational for freedom and liberation is "Crossing the Rough Terrain," Where Nazrul has told the hopeless nation that the deprived people will get a taste of independence in a few

days. So now they have to cross this inaccessible path of freedom consciously. Nazrul says,

“The sun of India, which plunged in Ganges
Will rise again with bloody red color stained with
our blood
The martyrs who sang the song of life on the
hanging altar
Have quietly returned to make another sacrifice
Time has come for us to surpass the challenge
To rescue our motherland
The ship is rocking, water is rising, Captain,
beware!” (*Two Genius from the East and West*,
2014, p.41)

The exact meaning is observed in Faiz's poem "A Few Days More," where he says to survive amid this exploitation for a few more days. The light of liberation will shine. Faiz says,

“Only a few days, dear one, a few days more.
Here in oppression’s shadows condemned to
breath,
Still for a while we must suffer, and wipe, and
endure
.....
Yes, but to tyranny no many hours left now;
Patience, few hours of complaint are left us to
bear.”(Faiz, *Poems By Faiz*, 2000, p.79)

Discrimination was practiced based on religion, ethnicity, caste, and gender, as well as economic and political connections. Nazrul frequently said in his poetry that all human beings ought to be free and treated with equal respect based on two criteria: morality and self-dignity. Belief in equality, truth, and fairness is the path to the summit of character and self-dignity. Nazrul wrote extensively on the issue of equality and human rights-based on this philosophy.

The feelings that Nazrul sought to express via his poems may be found in Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry. Faiz Ahmad Faiz is one of the most famous revolutionary poets in the world. Faiz is a word that conjures up images of protest, struggle, freedom, revolution, and optimism. His poetry isn't only for fun; some truths, most notably social realities, lay the path for social change and the creation of more faithful creative works. The more his poetry is dismantled, the more hidden messages in it may be discovered. One of his most famous poems against Zia’s regime is “We will see” (“Hum Dekhenge”) –

When the heavy mountains of injustice
Will blow away like cotton-wool
Beneath the feet of us oppressed
Like a heartbeat this land will beat
And above the heads of the people-of-power
When lightning cracks and crackles
We will see! (Faiz, *The Colours of My Heart*, 2017, p. 10)

In his poetry, Faiz employs Islamic etymological terms. However, it would be incorrect to assume that his poetry is agnostic about religion. In his poems, he constantly favours humanity. His awareness talks of equality in all areas, which is reflected in Nazrul's poetry as well. The most famous *Ghazal* in the collection, 'Slate and Pen' (Lauho qalam), is about Faiz's zeal and determination to actualize his perfect desire and attain his aim. Faiz says,

I will go on the nurturing the Tablet and the pen
I will go on the recording what the hearts go through
I'll go on providing reasons for the sorrow of love
I'll keep going kind to the desolation of the times
(Faiz, *The Colours of My Heart*, 2017, p. 25)

It is very surprising that same expressions can also be found in Nazrul's poem "The Rebel" where Nazrul utters,

I am the Bedouin, I am the Chengis,
I salute none but me!
I am thunder, I am Brahma's sound in the sky and on the earth,
I am the mighty roar of Israfil's bugle,
I am the great trident of Pinakpani,
I am the staff of the king of truth,
I am the Chakra and the great Shanka,
I am the mighty primordial shout!
I am Bishyamitra's pupil, Durbasha the furious.
(Nazrul, *Poet of Tolerance*, 2013, p. 64)

Nazrul's communist ideology was strong. Nazrul's communism can be understood perfectly through his poem "Proclamation of Equality." In this poem, it is repeatedly said that there is nothing better than equality. Equality is the natural way of human liberation. This equality is the bearer of true freedom. In this poem, Nazrul uses different symbols from every religion so that his religious equality could also come out. In that poem,

"Why go through all the trouble?
And Why haggle in the market?
You can find the fresh flowers blooming just on the roadside!

I sing of equality." (Islam, *Poet of Tolerance*, 49)

In his poem "We Will See", Faiz also says that the end of the regime will one day bring equality. The power of the mighty will end. The thrones of kings will fall. Everyone will stand in the same row. This thought is not only his revolutionary thought but also communism.

"Then we of clean hearts-condemned by Zealots
those keepers of faith,
We, will be invited to that altar to sit and govern-
When crowns will be thrown off-and over turned
will be thrones
We will see
Certainly we, too, shall see
That day that has been promised to us" (Faiz, *The Colours of My Heart*, 2017, p.10)

CONCLUSION

Instead of focusing exclusively on aesthetics, these poets, Nazrul and Faiz, expressed their ideals through poetry to serve a social purpose. The purpose is to support mankind and wage a protest against dictators who oppressed the innocent. They devised and invested in different social and economic paradigms in order to portray the various patterns of violence. They have depicted the suffering of oppressed people and suggested a path to ultimate liberation. Because of the universality of their content and subjects, their poems transcend time. Although they spoke in two different languages for the rights of the subaltern, yet the essence of their poetry is one and the same. The liberation of humanity was their main objective. Digging further into the political themes reveals that the two poets are adamant that the sacrificial deaths of ordinary people to maintain and safeguard the country's freedom are not ordinary deaths; rather, their deaths in the service of a cause make them eternal beyond the ages and times. Both the poets address the oppressed and encourage them not to feel ashamed or humiliated as a result of the oppressors' actions. The poems have undertaken deal with the issue of socially and politically oppressed subalterns and whose voices are not even heard in the stately, columned halls of authority. Kazi Nazrul Islam and Faiz Ahmed Faiz were the agents of social transformation who attacked the dominant ideologies and were committed to raise the voices of the subalterns.

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